

What the 'lady in the well' tells us about ancient population movement in the Middle East

The bones of a woman of Central Asian descent found at the bottom of a deep well after a violent death in an ancient city in Turkey are helping scientists understand population movements during a crucial juncture in human history.

Researchers have dubbed her the “lady in the well” and her bones were among 110 skeletal remains of people who lived in a region of blossoming civilization running from Turkey through Iran between 7,500 and 3,000 years ago.

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Her DNA showed she hailed from somewhere in Central Asia – perhaps 2,000 miles (3,200 km) or more away. She died at about 40 to 45 years old, the researchers said, probably between 1625 BC and 1511 BC. Her body bore signs of multiple injuries.

“How and why a woman from Central Asia – or both of her parents – came to Alalakh is unclear,” said Ludwig Maximilian University Munich archaeologist Philipp Stockhammer, co-director of the Max Planck-Harvard Research Center for the Archaeoscience of the Ancient Mediterranean and co-author of the study published in the journal *Cell*.

“Trader? Slaves? Marriage? What we can say is that genetically this woman is absolutely foreign, so that she is not the result of an intercultural marriage,” Stockhammer added. “Therefore, a single woman or a small family came this long distance. The woman is killed. Why? Rape? Hate against foreigners? Robbery? And then her body was disposed in the well.”

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